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SUBJECT: DESERT ARAB SHEIKH COMPLAINS OF GOS INDIFFERENCE

REF: (A) KHARTOUM 463  
(B) KHARTOUM 454

1. (SBU) Summary: A North Kordofan desert Arab sheikh told poloff that Darfur insecurity has changed the way camels from the region are transported to Libya - by truck to avoid raids by the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) and take advantage of empty trucks returning to Libya. He criticized JEM and other intolerant religious groups for possibly threatening the traditional Sudanese Sufi version of Islam and his tribe's traditional mediation role. He also criticized the government for ignoring his tribesmen by not providing government services such as medical and veterinarian care. End summary.

#### CLOSER TRIBAL ECONOMIC TIES TO LIBYA

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2. (SBU) Nomadic desert Arab tribal Sheikh Abel Gadir, of the Ashraf tribe, described life for desert Arabs during a recent conversation with poloff. Life for the Ashraf, who reside in the broad geographic area of the Libyan Desert that extends into North Kordofan, North Darfur and the Northern State, traditionally revolved around tending camel herds and occasionally making the 15-day trip to the Kufra Oasis in Libya where they sell camels to buy millet and dates. (Note: Many of the Ashraf now live in towns such as Obeid and Nahud. End note.)

3. (SBU) As an alternative to herding the camels to Libya, some herders have sought to rent Libyan trucks that are returning to Libya after selling their goods in El-Fasher. Gadir said that until recently, many tribesmen preferred to herd their camels rather than pay 1,000 Libyan dinars, the price to transport up to 15 three-year old camels by truck. While cost was certainly part of the calculation, he said that many desert Arabs believed that the three-day trip by truck weakened young camels, which would then bring less than the usual 1,500 Libyan dinar price.

4. (SBU) However, in the past year, the price of camel transport to Libya's Kufra oasis has softened as trucks coming from Libya stop in North Kordofan to sell their millet and dates rather than travel the longer and more dangerous journey to the North Darfur State capital, El Fasher. To avoid transporting an empty truck back to Libya, the truckers have slashed their prices as much as half resulting in many tribesmen planning to sell their camels in Libya. Gadir said despite the lower transport prices he plans to continue herding camels overland, but that the recent May 10 Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) attack on Omdurman has made trucking camels to Libya even more attractive.

#### DESERT TRIBES MOVED EAST TO AVOID RETREATING JEM

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5. (SBU) Gadir said that shortly after the May 10 JEM attack on Omdurman, many desert Arabs encountered JEM attackers who were making their way west back toward the Tibesti Mountain Plateau in

Chad. He said that with the vehicles running out of fuel, the JEM fighters they encountered demanded the desert Arabs give them camels. He added that the JEM believed that traveling by camel made them less likely to be observed by patrolling Sudanese aircraft and, more significantly said Gadir, the camels could be milked for food and then easily sold for cash upon arrival in Chad. Gadir said that his tribe is armed, but they wanted to avoid any needless conflict and therefore provided the camels to the JEM. After initial encounters, he decided to avoid future JEM contact. "We gave them camels, and I specifically instructed my people not to follow them or to steal them back." Gadir said that to avoid any additional encounters with the JEM, many desert Arabs quickly traveled east hoping to avoid any fleeing JEM fighters. The downside to this, said Gadir, is that Kufra Oasis is now farther away, so herding camels to Kufra will take longer and increase their exposure to theft from any JEM stragglers. As a result, many tribesmen will probably transport their camels by truck, further cementing their economic ties to Libya.

NOT A JEM SUPPORTER  
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16. (SBU) Asked whether his tribe supported JEM and their attack on Omdurman, Gadir said that while it's true that desert Arabs gave food to JEM fighters on their way to Omdurman, this was an act of hospitality rather overt support. He said that the Ashraf tribe are traditional mediators in Sudanese desert society and pride themselves on maintaining good relations with all tribes including the Zaghawa. He even claimed to have negotiated with "sultan" Mansur Dousa Deby, brother of Idriss Deby. However, he said JEM and other groups that support less tolerant forms of Islam threaten his own tribe's traditional Sufi-based beliefs, and more importantly,

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their traditional mediation role. Gadir expressed concern that this traditional role (as well as the Ashraf tribe's place in desert society) would be totally undermined if the young militant JEM Zanhawa, along with the Bideiyat (closely related to the Zaghawa), are able to establish a separate "sultanate" under Chadian President Idriss Deby composed of parts of Chad and areBs of Kordofan.

BUT CRITICAL OF THE GOVERNMENT  
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17. (SBU) Asked if his tribesmen were recruited to serve as janjaweed in Darfur, Gadir sidestepped the question by Biting his tribe's traditional role as mediators and the\ la-basted the government for doing nothing to dispel foreigner's negative impressions of the desert Arabs. He complained that the government is leaving the desert Arabs to take the blame for the killings in Darfur. He added that the government has forgotten its commitment to the desert Arabs and needs to provide medical and veterinarian care.

COMMENT  
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18. (SBU) The Ashraf tribe is smaller than larger Arab tribes such as the Kababish and Rizeigat, and many have now settled in towns in Kordofan such as Obeid and Nahud. The Ashraf traditionally have had connections to tribes in Libya, and have always sold their camels in either Libya or Egypt. The transition to transporting camels by truck also represents a change in the lifestyle of the Ashraf, who now live in towns and are less likely to make the journey with their camels across the desert if trucks are available cheaply. The sheikh's complaint that his tribe may lose its mediation role is somewhat overstated, as the Ashraf is a small tribe with little influence, but the complaint about government neglect is common among all Arab tribes in Darfur and Kordofan, and shows how limited the regime's support is in these areas. Ashraf, like all Arab tribes in these regions, have been recruited to serve as PDF (Popular Defense Forces) or "murahaleen" in the South and "janjaweed" in Darfur in the past, and by complaining to us about the government these tribes hope to distance themselves from the regime. This is likely why the sheikh sought us out, with the useful pretext of sharing some interesting stories about camel trading and encounters with JEM in the desert.

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